

Small schools create big boost in grad rates

By Karen Matthews
Associated Press

NEW YORK — They were known as dropout factories: big high schools in poor neighborhoods where only one-fourth to one-third of students graduated.

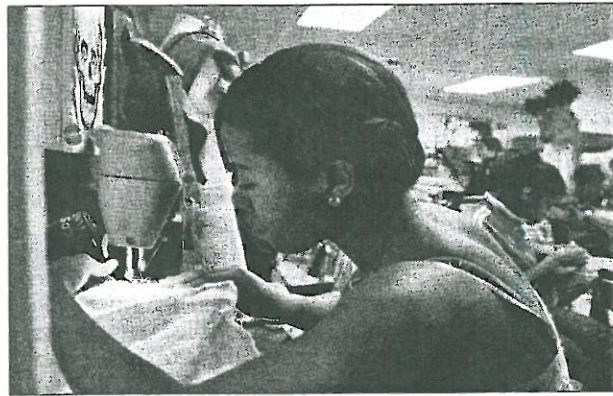
But under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City has been closing those schools, replacing them with small schools, many pegged to themes like the fashion industry or the business of sports.

A study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation — which has invested more than \$150 million in New York City schools — suggests that the small schools have succeeded in boosting graduation rates for the city's most academically challenged students.

Supporters say small schools can give one-on-one support to struggling students, and the specialized programs help entice them to apply to schools that match their interests.

"This shows the strategy is working," said New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, who since 2002 has shut down more than 20 large high schools and replaced them with 216 small schools with names like the Academy of Health Careers or the Law, Government and Community Service Magnet High School.

The study released last week by the education think tank MDRC examined students at 105 of the new high



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Shanice Israel, a senior at Bronx Theater High School, sews costumes for a production of "Alice in Wonderland."

schools with 550 students or fewer.

It found that by the end of their first year of high school, 58.5 percent of students at the so-called "small schools of choice" were on track to graduate in four years, compared with 48.5 percent of the students at other schools.

By the fourth year, the small schools had an overall graduation rate of 68.7 percent, compared with 61.9 percent for the control group. Both numbers were much higher than the graduation rates at the closed schools.

Because New York City's system for assigning students to high schools is partly a lottery, the study's authors could compare students who got into the small schools with similar students admitted to other schools. The small schools are not academically selective; they are open to all eighth-grade graduates.

Both groups were overwhelmingly black and Hispanic and living in neighborhoods with high poverty rates — students most at risk for dropping out.

New York's new high schools typically operate in clusters inside the shells of the schools they replaced.

The eight-story John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx has been broken up into six schools, including the Bronx Theatre High School, where students recently designed costumes and read scenes to each other. Photos in the hallway showed past productions of "Twelfth Night" and "A Raisin in the Sun."

Student Anna Gonzalez said she fell in love with costume design and hopes to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology when she graduates.

"I can actually create it and people wear it," she said.